

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 5, 2021 (Proper 18, Year B)
Mark 7:24-37

I'm not going to start with a joke or a story today. We're going to dive right in here, because this is a pretty difficult, even DISTURBING, passage from Mark.

"Let the CHILDREN be fed FIRST, for it is not fair to take the CHILDREN'S food and throw it to the DOGS."

Okay, let's be frank: that was just MEAN. Jesus is approached by a woman, which alone tells you something about her, because in those days, women didn't speak to men in public at ALL. But it's not just a woman, it's, a GENTILE woman, a SYROPHOENICIAN Gentile woman, to be exact, a FOREIGNER, and an ENEMY. Which is Mark's way of telling us that she's about as FAR AWAY from Jesus socially as possible.

Her daughter is sick, possessed by an unclean spirit, and so she comes and bows down at his feet in a posture of COMPLETE HUMILITY to beseech him to do for her little girl what he'd done for so many others.

And here's where things get disturbing. Jesus REFUSES. More than that, he INSULTS her. More than THAT, given that she's BEGGING on her KNEES, Jesus HUMILIATES her, comparing her to a dog.

But this woman is fierce, the way ONLY the MOTHER of a sick child can be. She won't be brushed off or cast aside. She won't be stopped. We can almost hear her say, "Call me DOG, will you? FINE. Because I love my DAUGHTER so much, I'll TAKE your insult. But at LEAST give a dog her DUE, the CRUMBS off the table."

And then Jesus changes his mind, responding to her TENACIOUS, DESPERATE faith by COMMENDING her and HEALING her beloved daughter.

But why did it have to be so HARD? Every time we hear these words we do a double take. "Did JESUS just say that?!" It seems out of CHARACTER for Jesus.

So, over the centuries, the church has done all kinds of mental gymnastics trying to SUGARCOAT this, to DEFEND Jesus. The TRADITIONAL interpretation SOFTENS the story by saying Jesus isn't ACTUALLY insulting her but TESTING her, to see if she really BELIEVED he could save her daughter. And, of course, she passes, and her daughter is healed.

But the TROUBLE with that interpretation is that a) nothing like it occurs ANYWHERE else in the Gospels, b) there's no MENTION of TESTING in the story, and c) it creates a rather COLD-HEARTED PICTURE of God as taunting and testing us in our DEEPEST moments of need.

But if not that interpretation, then what? Why on EARTH would Jesus react to someone in need in such a CALLOUS manner?

We're LEFT with what the text actually SAYS: Jesus, at that MOMENT, actually THOUGHT that he had come to serve ONLY the children of Israel, that the message just for the JEWISH PEOPLE. Jesus HIMSELF hadn't yet REALIZED the full EXTENT of God's mission or just how RADICAL the NATURE of the kingdom that he proclaimed. Even JESUS was surprised by just how AMAZING God's grace is.

This exchange we read about today is one of those times we see the HUMAN side of Jesus. As humans, we know all too well how easy it is to fall into the typical dichotomies of in and out, saved and damned, worthy and unworthy, Jew and Gentile.

Sometimes, in our humanness, in order to learn the TRUTH, we need to be CONFRONTED by it. Maybe God PUT this woman in Jesus' way to test HIM, to stretch him, to extend his imagination to believe that God's kingdom includes ALL people – Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles – ALL people. She SHOWED Jesus, and we the church, that God's love and grace is for EVERYONE, NO

exceptions. The expansiveness of God's love, God's healing, God's grace will not be limited by any location or any laws. It will not be diminished by any creed or decree. It will not be regulated by the many reasons WE come up with as to why God could NOT POSSIBLY BE THAT good of a God. God's kingdom is so huge, so vast, so unexpectedly gracious and wildly inclusive that it even takes JESUS a little while to fully grasp it.

This is a turning point in Jesus' life, a moment when he LEARNED something, something essential to who he was, something that would define the rest of his life.

Now that idea really blew my mind when I was in seminary. Jesus could be TAUGHT!! Some of my classmates thought it was blasphemy. They said, "Jesus is perfect. He would know everything already!" But others of us thought it was wonderful, because, although Jesus was divine, it meant that he was also human and therefore DIDN'T know everything. He was still LEARNING, just like us. God, in human form, went through the VERY human process of discovering and growing his faith.

So the SURPRISING thing is that, in THIS story, the good news comes from someone OTHER than Jesus: a woman, a woman who in THAT time and place WOULDN'T have been listened to, wouldn't have been given much credit for KNOWING ANYTHING at ALL. It comes from an outsider, a foreigner, a Gentile, who was NOT included in the promise of Abraham. It comes from the mother of a sick child. But she had heard the good news preached to OTHERS and had the AUDACITY to believe it was also FOR HER and her daughter. She DARED to believe that the kingdom of God was for EVERYONE.

And she was right. She REMINDED Jesus of the STORIES, of all the times his Father included even FOREIGNERS in the promise, even some of Jesus' own ancestors. She reminded Jesus that when he fed the 5000 with only 5 loaves of bread, there were 12 BASKETS FULL of the leftovers, MORE than enough for EVERYONE. She opened Jesus' eyes to SEE that God's love is bigger and greater and deeper and wider than even HE had imagined. And so this woman received far MORE than the crumbs; she received the BEST part of the meal — her daughter was healed.

Sometimes God does things we would NEVER expect God to do. And sometimes God does things we don't WANT God to do. God's ways are controversial and scandalous. Just think about it. God the almighty, creator of heaven and earth... coming down and becoming HUMAN, and walking and talking with the likes of US? The most powerful force in the universe...caring about ONE woman, ONE child, ONE man? The savior of the world...dying on a cross?

WE could never come up with this stuff. GOD does things differently than we do. God SURPRISES us. THAT'S what these TWO stories have in common – they're UNEXPECTED.

And THAT is why we have things like Sunday School and Wednesday Night Faith and the Promise Series for our children, and Affirmation and Youth programming. That why we have mentoring, for our adults to SHARE their story with the kids. That's why we men's and women's Bible studies at this church. So God can teach us, and show us how WIDE God's love is and how FAR God's love goes. God surprises us!

Through his Word, God opens OUR ears to HEAR the stories, and loosens our TONGUES to TELL the stories.

And you know, as we begin another year, God will surprise us again. I can't wait to see what God is going to do next. Amen.